

Flocking of Jacky Winter in paddocks during winter

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During monthly surveys of birds at Yaraandoo (32°38'S, 151°39'E), a lowland cattle property (approximately 100m altitude) near Paterson in NSW, I noted an increase in the numbers of Jacky Winter *Microeca fascinans* during the winter months of 2010. In 2011 I continued the surveys, each taking approximately three hours and following the same route, and found similar trends in monthly numbers (**Figure 1**).

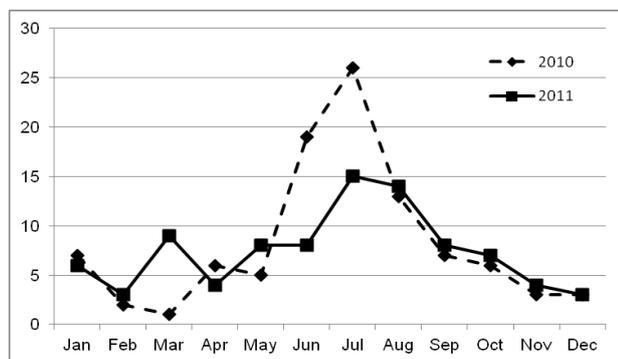


Figure 1. Seasonal variations in Jacky Winter numbers based on monthly surveys at Yaraandoo, a cattle property at Duns Creek near Paterson in NSW.

Jacky Winter were recorded during all 24 monthly surveys at Yaraandoo. In both years I found peak numbers in July, but the increase commenced earlier and the maximum count was larger in 2010 than 2011 (28 and 16 birds respectively). Jacky Winter numbers had declined substantially by August in both years. Except during the winter build-up, similar monthly numbers were recorded in both years.

During the winter period, June to August, the additional birds were primarily concentrated in open paddocks, making use of fence wires and isolated shade trees for perches while feeding. Approximately 15% of Yaraandoo comprises patches of woodland with a closed canopy, remnants now separated from surrounding woodland, which is extensive. In winter Jacky Winter were not recorded in the patches of remnant woodland.

The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) (Higgins & Peter 2002: 580) summarises the movements of the Jacky Winter as follows: 'variously described as resident, sedentary, seasonal visitor and nomadic visitor. Some movements reported, but extent or patterns not known. No large scale seasonal movements recorded.'

In NSW the breeding season of the Jacky Winter is from late August to early January (Higgins & Peter 2002: 584). Hence the dispersion of the flocks at Yaraandoo is consistent with the wintering birds departing to breed. Some birds breed on Yaraandoo, and an adult with a dependent young was seen in December 2011 on a lightly timbered slope where Jacky Winter are recorded throughout the year.

The extent and timing of movement from breeding to wintering grounds is unclear to judge from other studies summarised in HANZAB (Higgins & Peter 2002: 581). At Moruya in NSW birds arrived to breed in August-September and there were few records between January and July, where it was thought that movements were possibly just local. This proposition fits well with my observations other than that the timing of build up of numbers at Yaraandoo is well after the end of the breeding season.

In the Paterson area I have observed Jacky Winter holding territories throughout the year, both on Yaraandoo and elsewhere. In all instances these territories were in relatively open habitat at woodland edges. In contrasting style a small number of Jacky Winter, possibly a pair and their previous season's young, have in recent years maintained a territory at the edge of my property at Woodville near Paterson, again foraging in open areas, often using power lines for perching. Although I do not have detailed records, my impression is that their occupancy commences soon after the end of the breeding season. In 2011 they were first noted on 11 December.

I tentatively suggest that Jacky Winter breeding in woodland areas, as opposed to open areas with only a few isolated trees, move out of woodland after breeding as described in the Moruya study (Higgins & Peter 2002: 581). However, the timing of this partial exodus would be much earlier than the “flocking” observed on Yaraandoo, which peaks in July. Possibly Yaraandoo is used as a staging post for birds immediately before moving into surrounding areas of woodland to breed. It is also possible that some altitudinal migration occurs, with Jacky Winter moving to lowland areas like Yaraandoo in winter. Flame Robins *Petroica phoenicea* behave in this manner migrating to lower land in winter and forming flocks of up to 20 birds in open grassy habitats such as paddocks and parklands; it is the only Australasian red-breasted robin that forms flocks regularly (Higgins & Peter 2002: 666).

In studies at Green Wattle Creek, which is about 4 km from Yaraandoo, I found that the tendency of Grey Fantail *Rhipidura albiscapa* to move in winter from areas of woodland where they breed increases during periods of prolonged drought involving several successive years of below-average rainfall (Newman 2012). If similar factors drive the movement of Jacky Winter from woodland, the fact that 2010 and 2011 are part of an extended La Niña wet cycle provides a possible explanation of the lower numbers of Jacky Winter found at Yaraandoo during the winter of 2011 (i.e. woodland habitat becomes more mesic and hence

more suitable for Jacky Winter throughout the year). It is also possible that the Yaraandoo winter flocks involve local birds moving directly to Yaraandoo late in the non-breeding season as woodland foraging conditions deteriorate.

The above discussion highlights an opportunity to increase the understanding of Jacky Winter movements by monitoring the timing of their occupancy of non-breeding season territories.

ADDENDUM

In a previous paper (Newman 2011) I described the reaction of groups of Jacky Winter at Yaraandoo to “pishing” during the 2010 surveys, which resulted in the birds flying at me at eye level. The birds did not show this response in 2011.

REFERENCES

- Higgins, P.J. and Peter, J.M. (Eds). (2002). ‘Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, Volume 6: Pardalotes to Shrike-thrushes’. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)
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